Gypsies Plagued Fairbury for 100 Years

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Gypsies are technically known as the Romani peoples and are colloquially known as Roma. They originated in northwest India and then migrated to all of Europe, starting around 512 AD. The most distinguishing feature of the gypsies is that they are a nomadic or itinerant people who are continuously traveling. In England, gypsies are often called travelers. The gypsies migrated from Europe to America in the 19th century. Today there are an estimated 10 million gypsies in Europe and one million in the United States.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, gypsies in Illinois traveled in colorfully painted horse-drawn wagons. Their clothing was also very colorful. Caravans of the gypsy's traveled from one town to the next. The gypsy women would often go door to door begging for food. The women also did fortune-telling. After the fortune was read and the customer paid a small fee, the fortune-teller would steal all the money in the purse or wallet.

Gypsy men would often offer horse trades. If the customer did not like the terms of the deal, the gypsies would sometimes threaten to burn the farmer's barn or poison his animals. Gypsies also offered to do odd jobs. The gypsy observed where the customer kept his cash when the customer paid the bill. Later, the gypsy would steal all the money.

The first mention of gypsies in the Bloomington Pantagraph occurred back in 1878. A band of gypsies was camped near Bloomington. Mrs. Bramble's son had been seen talking to the gypsies quite often. When the gypsy camp left Bloomington, her son went missing. Mrs. Bramble followed the gypsy camp to Danville. She questioned the gypsies, and they said her son was not with them. The gypsies believed he had gone to Decatur.

In February of 1882, the Gibson City Courier published an article about Mrs. Rockhold in Fairbury. A gypsy fortune-teller cheated Mrs. Rockhold out of $150. This amount would be equivalent to $4,023 in today's dollars.

The Blade reported that a band of gypsies camped at the corners west of Wing in July of 1888. The gypsies were trading horses and telling fortunes to all who were foolish enough to deal with a gypsy.

In June of 1900, the Pantagraph reported a company of gypsy beggars visited the town of Normal. The gypsy women begged for food and money. The women often represented themselves as poor widows, with many children trying to make their way to a faraway relative that would care for them. The gypsy men lounged around their wagons parked on Linden Street. After the women returned with arm-loads of bread, meat, and butter, the caravan moved on to Bloomington.

In September of 1902, the Blade recounted that a large camp of gypsies was located just outside of town for several weeks. The gypsy women would visit the area farms and beg for food. The authorities tried to drive them away but only succeeded in making them move a little further from their old camp each time. Fairbury citizens were puzzled about why the gypsies were staying so long in one location.

The reason why the gypsies had stayed so long became clear when Livingston County Deputy Sheriff J. W. Morris returned from Indiana with a man and a 16-year-old young woman. The gypsy man had earlier eloped with the sister of his wife. When the Sheriff first arrived at the gypsy camp with the two missing people, the wife of the man and the wife's mother both fainted when they saw them. The man returned to his wife and two children. The 16-year-old was placed under the custody of one of the older women in the camp. The painted wagons and caravan then left the Fairbury area.

In October of 1906, the Blade published a gypsy story that took place in the southern Illinois town of Carmi. Gus Mitchell, a gypsy, swore out a warrant that a rival band of gypsies had stolen $1,000 from him. Sheriff Grisson took a dozen heavily armed deputies and went to search the opposing gypsy camp. Sheriff Grisson found $50,000 in gold and currency plus bank certificates of deposit. $50,000 would be equivalent to $1.44 million in today's dollars.

Everyone faced hard times during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Blade archives are full of stories about various gypsy robberies in Central Illinois during the Great Depression. One particularly interesting story took place at a Decatur bank in May of 1931. A group of colorfully dressed gypsies entered the bank. They distracted the bank teller with their flashy costumes and exaggerated gestures. One of the gypsies used a mechanical hand that was concealed in her clothing. The mechanical hand would shoot out a great distance, and a hook on the end would catch and retrieve a package of $10 bills. Authorities arrested two of the gypsy women and took them to the caravan. The gypsy leader paid the authorities the $500 that was stolen and $400 court costs in exchange for dropping charges against the women.

The most significant theft from a Fairbury resident by a gypsy occurred in June of 1982. Willis Harris Sr., who was 80 years of age, hired two gypsy men and a boy to repair his roof. After the job was completed, Harris went to his bedroom and removed $200 from a small case to pay the bill. He left approximately $6,000 in the case. This money was the life savings of Mr. Harris and would be equivalent to $16,100 in today's dollars.

After the gypsy men left, Mr. Harris checked his cash box and found it to be empty. The police were called, but the money was never recovered. One of the workers standing outside the house watched Mr. Harris go to the bedroom to get the cash. That worker then slipped into the house and stole all the money.

There are no known gypsy theft cases in Fairbury after the 1980s. Most of today's gypsies live in large cities, and they no longer focus on rural areas.

Three Gypsy Wagons Heading East on Locust Street.
Sunken Park is Just Beyond the Block Building on the Right Side.